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Growth of the Imam-Shahis

The Ismailis in Kashmir, Punjab and Sind were ardent and fervent followers, but the mission in Gujrat suffered a setback due to the negative propaganda of Nur Muhammad Shah (d. 940/1534), the son of Sayed Imam Shah. He however had renounced his allegiance with the Iranian Imams, but it is doubtful that he had ever claimed Imamate for himself.

Among the Imam-Shahis, a theory had been cultivated, equating Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad with Pir Shams as one and the same person. This theory has it that Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad had abdicated the Imamate in favour of Imam Kassim Shah and himself took up the mantle of the Pir and started mission in India. This "abdiction theory" is also sounded in the "Satveni'ji Vel" of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah, which had been inserted in later period. The modern scholars curiously speculate that this theory was the creation of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah to legitimate his alleged claim to the Imamate that would have served his self-interest to endorse a genealogy, tracing his father back to the Ismaili Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad. It should be however noted that the "Satveni'ji Vel" had been in private collection of the Imam-Shahis in Pirana, containing 200 stanzas with endless errors and interpolations, whose 150 stanzas were printed in 1906 at Bombay into Khojki script for the Ismailis. The remarks of the modern scholars in favour of the alleged claim of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah are based solely on the printed text of 1906.

W. Ivanow writes in his "The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat" (JBBRAS, XII, 1936, p. 32) that, "As he (Nur Muhammad Shah) surely could not pretend to be a son of an Imam, he had to invent a theory of his descent from the line of the Imams, and the coincidence in the names of his ancestors, (Pir) Shamsuddin, with the name of Shamsuddin the Imam, offered an easy opportunity." Being inspired with the comment of W. Ivanow, Dr. Azim Nanji writes in "The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent" (New York, 1978, pp. 63-4) that, "Since he (Nur Muhammad Shah) claimed to be an Imam, it was necessary according to standard Ismaili belief that he should want to establish a direct lineage from the Imams in order to authenticate his claims. By making Pir Shams and Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad one and the same person, and by claiming direct descent from Pir Shams, he could thus substantiate his own right to the Imamate." In sum, it seems that the scholars have not gone through the "Satveni'ji Vel" as thorough as required. The "abdiction theory" making an Imam to degrade to the office of the Pir is the creation of later period, when a part of the ginans including "Satveni'ji Vel" were in the possession of the kakas in Pirana, who were responsible to distort the ginans and inserted "abdiction theory" to suit the flavour of their beliefs. It is therefore not justifiable to cultivate any doubtful idea for Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah, charging him to have incorporated such theory in his work to boost his alleged claims.

It is beyond the province of our study to evaluate the veracity of "Satveni'ji Vel" of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah, but we will discuss the alleged claims in the light of the few verses derived from the printed text as under:-

"Both authorities of Imamate and Pirship were with Imam Shams" (78: 9)

"Shah Shams arrived in India and made his public appearance" (79: 1-2)

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"Pir Shams then proceeded to Punjab after consigning Imamate to Kassim Shah. It was Samvat 1366 (1310 A.D.) when Kassim Shah assumed the Imamate. Hence, the office of the Pir was retained by Pir Shams and that of the Imamate by Kassim Shah" (94: 1-6)

It ensues from above verses that Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad had come to India, and when he intended to proceed to Punjab, he retinguished his office of Imamate to Kassim Shah, and retained the office of the Pir with him. In other words, Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad henceforth came to be known as Pir Shams in India. It however implies that the Imamate remained with Kassim Shah and his descendants, while the office of the Pir with Pir Shams and his descendants. It is therefore crystal clear to judge that any claim of Imamate being advanced in the descent of Pir Shams cannot be validated, since he was then not an Imam, but a Pir. According to the fundamental belief of the Ismailis that an Imam is the sole authority to commission any person in his absolute discretion to the post of Pir, and thus the "Satveni'ji Vel" does not claim that Imam Kassim Shah had appointed or declared Imam Shamsuddin Muhammad as a Pir and therefore the "abdiction theory" cannot be historically true, but it was the causation of the later Imam-Shahi kakas, whose beliefs used to be changed from time to time, who needed to interpolate the notion of the ginans.

While going through the old manuscripts of the ginans, one can find an indication that the original work of "Satveni'ji Vel" should have been projected for 100 stanzas, dealing with the history of the Imams and the Pirs. It was compiled between 922/1516 and 926/1520 when Sayed Imam Shah (d. 926/1520) was most probably yet alive, therefore, it seems impossible that the "abdiction theory" had been inserted to boost his alleged claim by Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah during the period of his father. There is another point to touch that Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah was admittedly well grounded in Ismaili history and known that an Imam should be the son of the Imam, therefore, his alleged claim to the Imamate is highly doubtful.

Sayed Imam Shah is said to have composed "Moman Chetamani" in which he also admits that, "Shamsuddin was the son of Pir Salauddin, who embarked from Tabriz, and he was Pir Shamsuddin to spread the religion" (no. 204). "He showed Kassim Shah, the Lord of the age" (no. 362). Among the Imam-Shahis, the "Jannat-nama" is a famous work of Sayed Imam Shah, which reads:- "Recognize Pir Satgur Nur, who is (in the same authority) that of Salauddin, His son was Pir Shamsuddin and Pir Nasiruddin was from the latter." (no. 77). It further ensues from these verses that the "abdiction theory" did not exist in the time of Sayed Imam Shah and his son, but was coined in later period. It may be known that the original manuscript of the "Satveni'ji Vel" is being unearthed to bring further light on the subject in near future.

It is further suggested that Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah had used the word nar for himself in the ginans to boost his alleged claim, which is another layer of confusion added in the modern sources. While dismissing this theory, we will have to seek the reasons. It has been observed that the reciters of the ginans used to pronounce the word nar instead of nur in many cases and gradually they found coherance in the two words, and seem to have ignored the distinction between them. They found striking parallels between these two words, and being Indians by origin, the reciters preferred to pronounce the Hindi word nar instead of the foreign word nur in many ginans.

The scrunity of the old manuscripts also throws a flood of light that the scribes had transmuted the word nur (light) for nar (Lord), resulting the rendering of Nur Muhammad Shah to Nar Muhammad Shah in the old manuscripts. The modern writers, without

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examining the transcriptional error, hazard to theorize that Nur Muhammad, an alleged aspirant to the office of the Imamate had claimed as nar (Imam) for himself. Given that he had applied the term nar for himself in his ginans, composed almost during his father's time, then it seems improbable that his claim originated when his father was alive. His extant ginans also do not sound to this effect a little likelihood. Summing up all these materials for evidence, it is worth stressing that the reliance on the key term, can do great injustice to its interpretation and even to larger tradition, and research must cross many barriers of old tradition and poor thinking in order to stand within another world view.

It is however certain that Nur Muhammad Shah had violated the communal disciplines, engendering the principal cause of the split after 926/1520, and he was the real renegade to have abjured Ismailism. In "Manazil al-Aqtab", Nur Muhammad is made responsible for separating his followers from the main Ismaili stock. W.Ivanow writes on the basis of "Manazil al-Aqtab wa Basati'nul Ahbab" (comp. 1237/1822) that a certain Mukhi Kheta was the head of 18000 converted Hindus during the time of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin. He was comissioned to collect religious dues in a tithe wallet (jholi) in Gujrat and send the accumulated funds back to the main treasury in Sind. Not only this practice followed during the time of Sayed Imam Shah, but it was carried on even under Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah himself. The tradition has it that immediately after the death of his father, Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah had ordered Mukhi Kheta that the accumulated funds of Gujrat should henceforth be deposited in Pirana, instead of being sent to Sind. Mukhi Kheta emphatically refused it, which was more likely a bone contention of the defection. The religious dues at that time was collected by the authorized vakils, and deposited at Sind, and thence the whole lot was to be remitted to Iran.

It seems that a large conversion had been resulted in the time of Sayed Imam Shah in Gujrat and Kathiawar, where Mukhi Kheta used to collect the religious dues since the time of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin, procuring there more funds than that of Kutchh, Sind and Punjab. It is therefore most probable to speculate that Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah had desired the main treasury to be shifted gradually from Sind to Pirana, so that he might use the funds at his liberty. It should also be noted that between the year 926/1520 and 931/1525, the tradition of venerating the shrines of the Sayeds had largely developed among the followers who had supported Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah. It also seems that he had planned to make Pirana a centre of veneration more attractive than that of Uchh in Sind. In pursuit, he naturally needed huge funds, which he could only generate from the main treasury, and that is why he desired to transfer it from Sind to Pirana. He however instructed his followers to deposit their religious dues and offerings in Pirana.

Mukhi Kheta seems to be a regular and faithful in his duties. In the absence of any official orders, he could not comply with the instructions of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah. Since Sind was near Iran than that of Pirana in making remittance of the whole funds to the Imam, therefore, it was immaterial to transfer the main treasury from Sind to Gujrat. In sum, the refusal of Mukhi Kheta and the opposition of Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah, had marred the relations of the Ismailis of Sind and Gujrat, and it was an early brick of the schism, making the Indian Ismailis bifurcated into the two branches, i.e., the Khojas Ismailis and the Imam-Shahis.

After being disappointed, Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah came up openly to misguide the Ismailis in India. All this had been brought to the notice of Imam Nuruddin Ali in Iran, who at once outcast him from the community with a express command, and instructed the faithful Ismailis to refrain from their association with the Sayeds of Pirana. Thus, Sayed Muhammad Shah and his followers defected from the Ismaili community, and laid the

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foundation of their own sect, known as the Imam-Shahis. The schism took place in the emotionally charged climate around 931/1525. W. Ivanow writes in "The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat" (JBBRAS, XII, 1936, p. 45) that, "The split, caused by Nur Muhammad Shah's pretentions, has done incalculable harm to his sect. Instead of being followers of Ismailism, the ancient and highly philosophical branch of Islam, with its great cultural traditions and the mentality of a world religion, they have become nothing but a petty community of "Piranawallas", a kind of inferior Hindus, and very doubtful Muslims. Anyhow, orthodox Muslims do not regard them as Muslims, and orthodox Hindus do not regard them as Hindus." In sum, the Imam-Shahi sect lost all its cultural elements and rapidly sank deeper and deeper, with no prospect of early regeneration. It is now a hodgepodge of Hindu and Islamic elements.

Bibi Khadija, the wife of Sayed Imam Shah seems to have played a seminal role in the schism. She extended her support to Nur Muhammad Shah and repudiated the recognition of the Imam in Iran. She seems to have declared Nur Muhammad Shah as the successor of Sayed Imam Shah and the dissociated group became known as the Imam-Shahis, making Sayed Imam Shah as the founder. She summoned Sayed Rehmatullah Shah, the son of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin at Pirana to win his support, but he refused to throw off his allegiance to the Imam in Iran. He stayed at Pirana for few months, and returned after marrying with a Sayed lady. It is recounted that Sayed Rehmatullah propagated among the Ismaili circles in India through his messengers that he had nothing to do with the Sayeds of Pirana. He also arranged to sent a large amount of religious dues through two persons in Iran. Khayr Khwah Herati (d. after 960/1553) also confirms the visit of two Indian Ismailis, the followers of Sayed Rehmatullah Shah, who had come to Khorasan on their way to search for the Imam to present religious dues, vide his "Tasnifat", edited by W.Ivanow, Tehran, 1961, p. 54.

Sayed Rehmatullah is said to have visited Badakhshan and Anjudan and reported whole story to the Imam. He finally settled down in a village, called Kadi in Gujrat.

Hence, a large conversion of Sayed Imam Shah in Gujrat suffered a great reverse and the half-baked adherents of Islam were dragged into the most furious blasts of hostile winds. This alarmed a group of the adherents, inducing them to retrace their steps towards the fold of Hinduism, but most of them remained faithful to Ismailism. But, a major group in Pirana dissociated at the head of Nur Muhammad Shah, became known as the Imam-Shahis, who followed the mixed rituals of Islam and Hinduism, like Hussaini Brahmin, Shanvi and Bad Khwans. They propagated that the successor of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin was Sayed Imam Shah, who was followed by Sayed Nur Muhammad Shah. The schism also effected the Satpanth Literature, i.e., the ginans. It is most certain that the ginans of Sayed Imam Shah had been adjusted at Pirana to suit the flavour of the Imam-Shahis. The mainstream of the community, known as the Khojas in Sind, Kutchh, Kathiawar and Gujrat continued to adhere to the Imam, and protected the accumulated ginans to great extent from being interpolated.

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